**Two Paul Robeson films - Britain, the mid-30's**


Although nominally and "legally" a British film, "Dark Sands" is one of those hybrid Anglo-US productions that abounded in the 30's, trying to find a formula that would pay off in both markets. Actually it has far more showmanship than most of its kind, probably because the American influences demanded are more than the British. Walter Putter, its writer-producer, specialised in actioners, westerns, and semi-exploitation documentaries like "Africa Speaks". He also wound up with most of the African footage from von Stroheim's "Queen Kelly". "Dark Sands" has a pretty solid little story, something of a less arty "Emperor Jones". It also has some excellent location work, and a genuinely big-scale desert battle sequence, although it all seems a bit disorganised and clumsily put together. Thornton Freeland was involved with some interesting films, including "Whooppee", but he never quite made his mark as a director of quality; most of his films share "Dark Sands"' characteristic of never fulfilling its potential, but being interesting and off-boat enough to be quite satisfying in a modest way. The linguistic attitude toward African negroes, so noticeable in "Senders of the River" is equally prevalent here - specifically in a newreel sequence where E.V.H. Emmett's familiar tones tell us that the Africans are "like children".

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Directed by Zoltan Korda; adapted from Edgar Wallace's stories by Lejos Biagi, with a song by Offenbach-Dell's music by Miasha Spolianski, with lyrics by Arthur Wimperis; photographed by Georges Perinal, Osmond Burrowdale and Louis Page; edited by Charles Crichton; 10 reels.

With Paul Robeson, Leslie Banks, Nina Mae McKinney, Robert Cochrane, Martin Walker, Allan Jeayes.

It has been over six years since we last ran this film; it hasn't shown up elsewhere in the internz, obviously is taboo for tv, and has perhaps added interest today to view through unrecognisable "remake" under the title "Coloss of Skeletons". It's a superb print, absolutely complete, and still an extremely well-made and interesting film. It's easy to understand how it disappeared so completely from theatrical and tv exposure however, since apart from the Paul Robeson angle, it's a hot potato in so many other ways. With the African political climate what it now is, together with the increasingly touchy racial issues in this country, the film could not now walk present exhibitors with very ticklish public relations problems. How quickly political tempers - and temper - change. Certainly this film, with its friendly but non-intellectual and non-ascendancy attitude towards the African Negro, would never have been made in this fashion today. Like all Korda films of the 30's, it is expertly made, full of solid production values and excellent photography. It dates hardly at all in a technical sense, and even the sparingly-used rear projection is more convincing than most such of that period. Like too many British films of this type, it never quite makes the most of its action scenes, but cleverly does. The location work in Africa is so well blended with footage shot in England that, a few obvious studio scenes apart, it is often difficult to tell which is England and which not. The shots of the river boat steaming into the African community at the end, for example, were all taken just a few miles outside London. On the whole, "Senders" was one of the best of the several British-made African adventures of the 30's. "Rhodes of Africa" was big, but stodgy; "King Solomon's Mines" fine and rousing, but marred by far too much obvious studio stuff. Certainly "Senders" has some of the best intercut documentary material in it, especially the lovely shots of the canopy skimming along the river and the beautifully photographed sequence of the animal stampedes, many of these shots now having been incorporated into the standard stock-shot libraries to be utilised in "B" films like "Drums of the Congo". Dubious of its boxoffice allure, "Showmen's Trade Review" in 1935 advised exhibitors to salvage the film thusly: "Plug Robeson strongly, selling the idea that here you have him in the primitive, Go Congo and jungle in lebby and front, with spears etc. Try war drum street bally, with travelling savage figure". Any volunteers to help us out??  

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*Wm. K. Eversole*